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India-Bangladesh Strategic Relations under Sheikh Hasina and Narendra Modi (2009-2024): A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines the transformation of India-Bangladesh relations during the Sheikh Hasina regime (2009-2024), with particular focus on the role of the Modi government (2014-2024). During this period, the relationship shifted from mistrust and limited cooperation to an institutionalised, multifaceted strategic partnership. The study focuses on three main areas: security and strategic cooperation; the peaceful resolution of border and maritime disputes; and the implementation of land-border agreements and connectivity-driven economic reciprocity. Various secondary sources, including books, articles, and newspapers, were analysed qualitatively. Neoliberal institutionalism, realism, and constructivism serve as the theoretical frameworks. The findings indicate that during this period, security cooperation strengthened, key regional disputes were peacefully resolved, and cross-border economic linkages increased notably. Consequently, this phase emerged as a stable and strategically important period in Indo-Bangladesh relations. It assists researchers, policymakers, and analysts in understanding the future trajectory of South Asian politics and regional cooperation.

Keywords: *Geostrategic Relations, Security, Borders-Maritime, Cooperation, Connectivity*

1. Introduction

India-Bangladesh relations have traditionally held a significant place in the South Asian political landscape, where the two nations are interconnected through geography, socio-cultural bonds, mutual security, and economic interests. These ties are not just bilateral; they substantially influence regional stability and South Asian geopolitics. However, India played an active political, diplomatic, and military role in Bangladesh's Liberation War (1971), which laid the groundwork for the country's independence (Sisson & Rose, 1990). While this event is seen as the moral and ideological basis of Indo-Bangladesh relations, the decades following independence have been marked by several crises. These challenges mainly stemmed from a lack of consistency and strategic focus (Chatterjee, 2016).

After 1975, Bangladesh experienced military rule, political instability, and shifts in foreign policy. All these factors contributed to increased suspicion in Indo-Bangladesh relations (Jahan, 1980; Lifschultz, 1979; Maniruzzaman, 1976). Border disputes, water-sharing conflicts, security concerns, and regional power influences complicated bilateral ties. During this period, engagement between the two countries was mostly *ad hoc*. Consequently, their relations could not develop into a sustainable strategic partnership.

The political stability established in Bangladesh, with Hasina at the helm since 2009, has brought epochal change in Indo-Bangladesh relations. The Hasina administration created a consistent and realistic

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foreign policy that prioritised regional cooperation, security, and economic development (Arefin, 2023). India's primary concern centred on curbing insurgent activities along the border areas. Measures undertaken by Hasina's government alleviated Indian security concerns and contributed to the restoration of mutual trust (Chakma, 2012).

The Modi government has added a new dimension to Indo-Bangladesh relations since coming to power in 2014. The "Neighbourhood First" policy emphasises engagement with South Asian neighbours and Southeast Asia. Therefore, Indo-Bangladesh doorstep empathy has gone beyond bilateralism to improve regional connectivity, trade, and broader geopolitical interests (Saifullah, 2020).

The peaceful resolution of border and maritime disputes between India and Bangladesh during this period was regarded as a significant development in their bilateral relations. In 2014, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) issued its ruling on the maritime boundary dispute. In 2015, the land border issue was settled through the Indo-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement (LBA). This fostered greater mutual trust and strengthened bilateral ties (Rabbani, 2024; Bhattacharya, 2018). These developments have contributed to the legal and institutional stability of bilateral relations, reduced mutual mistrust, and increased economic interdependence by establishing rail, road, waterway, and energy connectivity. Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla has referred to Indo-Bangladesh relations as a "role model" bilateral relationship in the international arena based on mutual trust, strategic cooperation and regional connectivity (Bharttacherjee, 2021).

With this strategic transition, however, structural obstacles remain. The Teesta water-sharing issue stays sensitive (Islam & Higano, 2000; Jahan, 2025). There are efforts to normalise it. This issue remains a sensitive topic (Islam & Higano, 2000; Jahan, 2025). Border clashes, even causing civilian casualties, and China's expanding presence in the region are increasing pressure on bilateral relations (Riaz, 2016). The core of Bangladesh's foreign policy is "friendship to all, hostility to none" (UNB, 2022). However, given the rising strategic competition between India and China, the country must maintain a certain level of subtlety and balance in its stance (Riaz, 2016; Mohan, 2015). In this context, Bangladesh has relied on historical experiences, concepts, and values to shape its foreign policy through analysis. Although this study lacks primary data, it provides a solid foundation by using high-quality secondary sources.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study of international relations mainly relies on various theoretical frameworks. These theories help us understand how nations behave, share power, and interact on the global stage. Theories of international relations offer essential frameworks for analysing these interactions and help us grasp the broader patterns of state behaviour. Additionally, the nature of these interactions is crucial in this field. This study systematically uses three main theoretical perspectives-*Realism*, *Neoliberal Institutionalism*, and *Constructivism*-to examine the nature, structure, and dynamics of Indo-Bangladesh relations. The integration of these theories forms an analytical framework capable of critically analysing relations concerning strategic interests and power structures, institutional cooperation and interdependence, and ideological, identity, and normative factors.

2.1 Realism

According to Realism, international relations take place within an anarchic framework where no central authority controls state behaviour. In this environment, each state is compelled to pursue self-reliant policies to preserve its sovereignty, security, and survival. Consequently, the pursuit of power and security becomes the primary motivation in international politics. This competition among states is likely to lead to mistrust and an atmosphere of uncertainty. Therefore, it suggests that in such an environment, a security crisis is likely to escalate into conflict. This defensive competition and the offensive actions of one state against another intensify the *security dilemma* (Herz, 1950; Jervis, 1978).

A pragmatic analysis of their bilateral relations reveals that both countries pursue their own interests in addressing security concerns, border stability, and regional pressures. The Hasina government's efforts to

contain insurgent groups, secure Northeast India, and resolve border insurgency have enhanced India's security (Shahriar, 2021; Alam, 2023; Rahman, 2024).

This bilateral cooperation should be examined within the context of South Asian geopolitics, where China's influence affects the relations between India and Bangladesh. According to pragmatic theory, states must adapt to existing power structures and security concerns to survive and reduce competition and exploitation (Waltz, 1979; Jervis, 1978).

2.2 Neoliberal Institutionalism

The second pillar of this theoretical framework is Neoliberal Institutionalism, which extends beyond Realism's focus on power and security by explaining international relations through institutional agreements, international law, and cooperation among state actors. This idea suggests that a country's interests drive its actions, but countries can still collaborate for a period and achieve positive outcomes. They can do this by using institutions and rules that everyone follows. This helps countries build greater trust and reduce conflicts. International institutions and rules act like a system that enables countries to work together. The concept is about how countries can collaborate to achieve mutual benefits. Countries can gain a great deal from institutions and rules (Keohane & Nye, 1973). Neoliberal Institutionalism is important because it shows how international institutions foster trust among countries. This trust promotes cooperation and cuts down the costs of doing business together. Overall, Neoliberal Institutionalism explains how international institutions help countries work together effectively.

In Indo-Bangladesh relations, this theoretical view is evident in the peaceful resolution of the maritime boundary dispute (2014) and the successful implementation of the LBA (2015). These events highlight how legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms can effectively resolve bilateral disputes without resorting to violence, thereby overcoming the limitations of power politics. Such cooperation does more than just balance power; it also fosters trust between India and Bangladesh and makes their interactions more predictable. This partnership benefits both nations, contributing to a more stable and enduring relationship. Neoliberal Institutionalism further suggests that connectivity, trade, and economic interdependence- like rail and road links, energy cooperation, and transit arrangements- lead to more institutionalised bilateral relations. This interdependence encourages mutually beneficial cooperation rather than competition and suspicion, thereby positively impacting regional stability and development in South Asia.

2.3 Constructivism

Constructivism does not see international relations merely as a result of power relations or institutional structures. It perceives international reality as a process shaped by the interaction of identities, ideas, social constructs, and moral norms (Wendt, 1999; Finnemore, 1996). From this perspective, state behaviour is not solely determined by material capabilities or structural constraints but is constructed and reconstructed through historical memory, ideological context, socialisation processes, and mutual understanding. Therefore, international politics is understood as a dynamic social process where meanings, identities, and interests are continually created and transformed through ongoing interaction.

Constructivism is particularly significant in Indo-Bangladesh relations because the Liberation War (1971), Bangladesh's history of independence, and the shared experiences of that period have greatly influenced the development of this bilateral relationship. The memory of India's support in Bangladesh's political and social spheres has fostered a positive collective memory that has long influenced mutual understanding and behaviour. This historical identity and moral connection have often served as the foundation for cooperation beyond strategic interests (Pattanaik, 2012).

Constructivism also explains how incidents such as border killings, water disputes, or diplomatic errors can create negative perceptions and distrust among the public, thereby changing the course of bilateral relations. Based on this theory, the stability of relations is not determined solely by policy agreements or the balance of power. Instead, it is fundamentally connected to social mentality, mutual trust, and shared

meanings. Consequently, Constructivism provides an alternative and complementary framework for understanding Indo-Bangladesh relations by emphasising ideological and moral elements alongside material interests.

Although Realism, Neoliberal Institutionalism, and Constructivism originate from different theoretical traditions, they do not conflict with one another in explaining the complex nature of Indo-Bangladesh relations. Instead, they offer an integrated and complementary analytical framework. In this context, realism explains the power structure, security concerns, and strategic interests of the bilateral relationship; neoliberal institutionalism analyses the form of interdependence through institutional cooperation, rule-based governance, and contractual solutions; and constructivism explains the role of conceptual and normative elements such as active identity, historical memory, social significance, and mutual understanding within the relationship.

This integrated theoretical framework examines the strategic transformation of Indo-Bangladesh relations by analysing the state's material interests, security concerns, moral values, legal and institutional frameworks, and socio-ideological interactions. Therefore, this relationship should be viewed as a dynamic, multi-layered, and evolving process rather than simply a matter of power politics or cooperation. Establishing such a theoretical framework offers a solid analytical foundation for studying research on security cooperation, border management, water-sharing challenges, regional connectivity, infrastructure initiatives, and China's geopolitical activities in South Asia. It also helps clarify the context, mechanisms, and reasons behind the development of Indo-Bangladesh relations over time.

3. Strategic Pillars of India-Bangladesh Relations

The recent change in Indo-Bangladesh relations, particularly before August 5, 2024, is not solely the result of diplomatic goodwill or leadership. Instead, it is rooted in several distinct and interconnected strategic pillars that have transformed the bilateral relationship into a multidimensional, institutional partnership encompassing security, the economy, connectivity, and regional geopolitics (Das, 2016; De et al., 2012). These pillars have become more organised, institutionalised, and strategic under the Sheikh Hasina government, especially during the Modi administration.

3.1 Security Cooperation and Strategic Stability

Security cooperation is a vital pillar of Indo-Bangladesh relations. Since 2009, the Bangladesh government has taken a strong stance against active separatist and insurgent groups in North-East India, which has greatly enhanced India's internal security (Pattanaik, 2012). As a result, border violence has significantly decreased, promoting a positive environment of mutual trust. Measures such as counter-terrorism, intelligence sharing, border management, and joint military and security exercises have not limited the security relationship to strategic coordination; instead, they have gradually evolved into a comprehensive strategic partnership (Pattanaik, 2012). From a realist perspective, this clearly shows the effort to protect the security interests of both states, with cooperation helping to maintain regional stability.

3.2 Peaceful resolution of border and maritime disputes

The second key aspect of bilateral relations is the peaceful resolution of long-standing border and maritime disputes. The 2015 LBA represents a historic milestone in this process by settling the enclave issue and providing many people with the opportunity to acquire citizenship and basic rights (Rabbani, 2024). Similarly, the settlement of a maritime boundary dispute through international arbitration in 2014 demonstrated the effectiveness of international law and rules-based processes in practice. This event supports the neoliberal institutionalism idea that bilateral disputes can be resolved peacefully through appropriate legal frameworks and institutional arrangements. This has made relations between the two countries more predictable and strengthened long-term stability.

3.3 Connectivity and Infrastructure Cooperation

Connectivity has become the third and fastest-growing pillar of Indo-Bangladesh relations. Rail, road, maritime, and energy connectivity have strengthened the economic and strategic interdependence between the two countries. Bangladesh's geographical location serves as an important strategic transit corridor for northeastern India (De et al., 2012; Pattanaik, 2012). The restoration of rail connectivity, the use of inland waterways, power trade, and cross-border energy projects have transformed the bilateral relationship from mere diplomatic courtesy to a practical and results-oriented partnership. In light of neoliberal institutionalism, such interdependence reduces the likelihood of conflict and gradually encourages long-term cooperation within institutional frameworks.

3.4 Economic Partnership and Trade Relations

Another important pillar of Indo-Bangladesh relations is economic cooperation. India has become one of Bangladesh's largest trading and development partners. Lines of Credit (LoC), infrastructure projects, and investment initiatives have further strengthened India's developmental presence in Bangladesh (Ministry of External Affairs India, 2024). Although there are some concerns in Bangladesh about trade deficits, non-tariff barriers, and market access, overall economic relations continue to expand (De et al., 2012). This pillar provides a solid material foundation for bilateral relations by making economic interests a more influential factor than political goodwill alone.

3.5 Human connections and historical links

From a constructivist perspective, people-to-people contact and shared historical memories have formed a silent yet deep foundation for Indo-Bangladesh relations. The experience of the 1971 Liberation War, cultural similarities, linguistic closeness, and social exchanges have all contributed to giving this relationship a unique and meaningful identity. The movement of individuals across education, culture, medicine, and tourism sectors has transformed the bilateral relationship from a state-centric to a society-oriented model (Pattanaik, 2012). However, incidents such as border killings, water-sharing disputes, and diplomatic failures can create negative public perceptions, which, according to Constructivist theory, may influence the future direction of bilateral relations. The above strategic pillars highlight that their relationship is not built on a single issue; rather, it is a mix of security, legal solutions, connectivity, economics, social ties, and geopolitics. These pillars have elevated the relationship from isolated diplomacy to a well-organised strategic partnership, which greatly supports regional stability and cooperation in South Asia.

4. China Factor and Regional Geopolitics

The Chinese context and regional geopolitics appear to be an indispensable element in the analysis of the strategic transformation of Indo-Bangladesh relations (Pattanaik, 2012). China's expanding economic and strategic influence in South Asia has situationally contextualised the bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh within a wider regional and global framework.

The core philosophy of Bangladesh's foreign policy is to establish friendly relations with all countries and avoid unnecessary conflicts, a principle that remains especially relevant today. Bangladesh has consistently maintained historical, cultural, and political ties with India, while also pursuing active cooperation with China in areas such as infrastructure, trade, and investment. India's strategic concerns have grown due to China's infrastructure investments in Bangladesh as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). From India's perspective, Chinese involvement is more than just an economic issue; it also relates to the broader regional balance of power (Xavier & Jacob, 2023). This situation can be analysed through the lens of Realism, where states compete to safeguard their security and influence.

On the other hand, India places special importance on Bangladesh within the framework of its "Neighbourhood First" and "Act East" policies. In this context, India has adopted a strategy to limit China's growing influence by providing credit assistance, participating in infrastructure development, and

encouraging projects that enhance regional connectivity. As a result, Bangladesh has sought to protect its national interests on one hand, while pursuing a well-coordinated, balanced foreign policy through multidimensional diplomatic relations. In this context, it can be said that the China factor has not weakened Indo-Bangladesh relations but has made them more strategic and calculated, with bilateral relations becoming part of regional power politics.

5. Challenges and Limitations

Although Indo-Bangladesh relations have improved during the Sheikh Hasina-Modi era, some structural obstacles and limitations remain. These issues affect the long-term sustainability of the relationship and mutual trust between the people.

5.1 Teesta Water Sharing

The Teesta River water-sharing issue has been a long-standing challenge between India and Bangladesh (Pattanaik, 2012). In 2011, both sides reached a draft agreement, but India's unstable politics, especially the lack of cooperation between the central government and the states, prevented progress (Dhaka Tribune, 2021; The Hindu, 2024). For Bangladesh, this is not about getting enough water or making more money; it is about fairness, justice, and the right to water. From this perspective, failing to resolve this dispute damages India's reputation and erodes trust between the two nations. The water dispute continues to affect the relationship between India and Bangladesh. Bangladesh seeks a fair share of water, and India's water-sharing actions are viewed with suspicion. This dispute concerns both countries.

5.2 Border Killings and Humanitarian Concerns

Civilian fatalities along the border, especially shootings, pose significant humanitarian and security challenges (Pattanaik, 2012). Although joint border management and patrol efforts have been implemented, these incidents still elicit negative public reactions. Despite robust security cooperation at the state level, claims of human rights and security violations involving civilians undermine the social foundation of bilateral relations.

5.3 Political uncertainty

Internal political changes in both countries can influence the stability of the bilateral relationship. The internal political transformation in Bangladesh and the post-election shift in India's policy priorities generate uncertainty for future cooperation (Pattanaik, 2012). This situation indicates that the relationship remains largely leadership-driven and not fully institutionalised.

5.4 Radicalisation and Terrorism

Cross-border radicalisation and terrorism present significant security and moral challenges to the relationship. In the past, both countries have been affected by the activities of various extremist and terrorist groups. Under Sheikh Hasina's leadership, Bangladesh adopted a *zero-tolerance* policy and enhanced intelligence sharing and border patrols with India (Singh, 2019). From a Realist perspective, this is crucial for safeguarding the security interests of both nations, but from a Constructivist perspective, misconceptions or allegations can impact mutual trust.

5.5 Economic and Commercial Barriers

Some structural constraints still exist in bilateral trade and investment. Trade deficits, nontariff barriers, limited transit facilities, and complicated VAT/customs systems often limit bilateral economic cooperation (De et al., 2012). While credit support and infrastructure projects have brought the sides closer, without a clear, unified policy, it is hard to rely on lasting stability or dependable investment.

5.6 Climate and Environmental Challenges

Bangladesh's geographical location and environmental issues, such as floods, river erosion, and climate change along its border with India, are creating new challenges for bilateral relations. (Mahla, 2025; Vij et al., 2019). Climate-related crises are not limited to the economy or water management; they also impact local livelihoods, security, and border stability.

6. Conclusion and Policy Implications

The Hasina-Modi period (2014-2024) can be seen as a stable and strategically crucial phase in the history of Indo-Bangladesh relations. During this era, the bilateral relationship has grown from limited diplomatic contacts to a comprehensive strategic partnership. Notably, the expansion of security cooperation, the peaceful resolution of border and maritime disputes, and the increase in connectivity and economic interdependence have clearly marked this transformation. Consequently, this period is considered a "Golden Era" or "Sonali Adhyay" of bilateral relations under the leadership of Narendra Modi and Sheikh Hasina (Ministry of External Affairs, 2021). This progress can be explained by the combined influence of three theoretical perspectives: the security-focused view of realism, the cooperative approach of neoliberal institutionalism, and the trust- and history-based interpretation of constructivism, all of which proved effective in this context. However, unresolved issues such as the Teesta water-sharing dispute, the recurrence of border violence, and regional pressures from the Sino-Indian rivalry also clearly reveal the inherent limitations of this relationship. Therefore, rather than viewing Indo-Bangladesh relations as a simple story of a single success, it is more accurate to see it as a complex, multi-layered, and evolving process. The long-term stability of this relationship will rely on building mutual trust, encouraging active people-to-people interactions, and improving institutional capacity. Policy initiatives are essential for ensuring future stability.

Firstly, it is crucial to move beyond individual diplomacy and develop bilateral relations based on institutional frameworks. Use alternative communication channels like high-level dialogues, joint commissions, and track-two diplomacy.

Secondly, developing a time-bound, evidence-based framework is crucial to resolving the Teesta water-sharing dispute.

Thirdly, adopting technology-based surveillance, collaborative patrols, and human rights-focused training is essential to balancing security needs with humanitarian principles in border management.

Fourthly, implement connectivity and infrastructure projects with Bangladesh as a key regional partner.

Finally, increasing public engagement through education, culture, and social exchanges will strengthen the social foundation of this relationship.

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